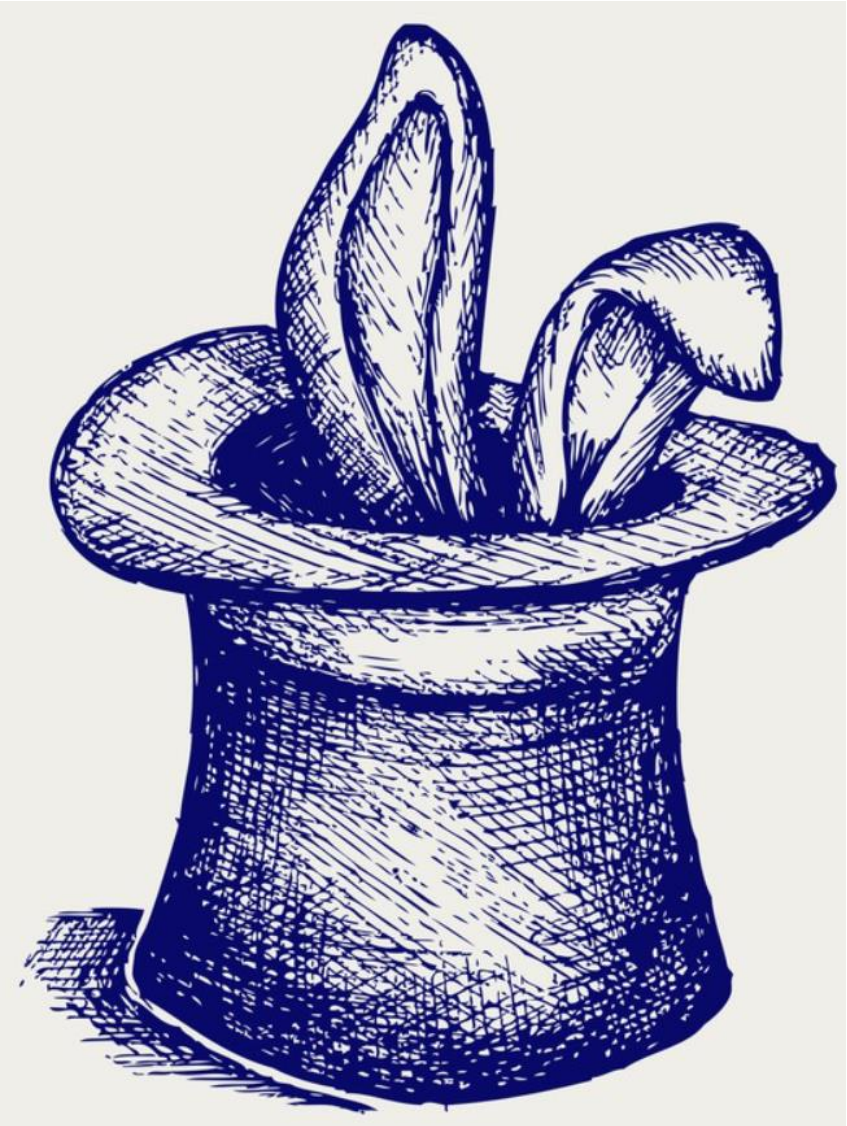
How can we design, evaluate and theoretically elaborate qualitative research methods in the digital age?



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[1] This paper is a slightly edited and updated version of an inaugural lecture I delivered at KU Leuven (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences) upon my appointment as Assistant Professor. The speech format of the text has been kept in order to preserve the oral nature of the argument.

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking you for showing up here today. Your being here, in what seems as an ever increasingly accelerating academic life, really means a lot to me. I can only hope that my talk, which will be about current questions in qualitative research as we are entering the digital age, will make this temporal deceleration worthwhile. Let's start.

As you all well know, the way we *present* the results of our research does not entirely correspond with the various and concrete ways in which we *start* our research. Most of the time, we exclusively *present* our research as a logical continuation of previous steps. We therefor make use of the work of other scholars, theories or previous research: we stand on the shoulders of proverbial giants to give our own work credibility, topicality and legitimacy. But we don't often *begin* a study that way. We often start a study because we are inspired by a talk with our colleagues, kids or friends; by some news in the paper or on tv that aroused our interest; by an intuition or hunch that we would like to address; and so on.

In a certain sense, then, we could conceive of academic publications, presentations, and indeed, inaugural lectures, as a very particular form of a hat-trick: positioned on the shoulders of giants, we pull knowledge out of the academic hat. Just as in the traditional magic trick, we make use of a very specific contrivance to explicitly direct the attention of our readers or listeners into one direction: just as the magician does, we often steer attention away from our personal interests and intuitions or, often even stronger, do as if these don't exist. Of course, we don't purport that the knowledge we draw out of the hat comes out of the void – as the magician does with his rabbit: the rabbit appears to come just out of thin air. But there is a striking similarity between the magician's and the academic's hat-trick*: we juggle*. We juggle as if this knowledge is based on the giants' shoulders alone. Let me rephrase this: we juggle by purporting not to be there ourselves. What we personally think, say, feel, and so on, tends to be rendered irrelevant in drawing knowledge out of the hat. Even stronger: the better we do away with ourselves *in the way we report* (this is important: I am only talking here in the way we report to our colleagues), the better we have performed the academic version of the hat-trick. I am not saying anything new here: this academic hat-trick has been analyzed extensively in a variety of disciplines (e.g. Feyerabend 1993 ; Latour, 1987; Wolcott, 2002).

Today, let me assure you, it is not my intention to give you yet another analysis of this trick. But I do want – to stay in the parlance of the magicians – to put my proverbial cards on the table. In the coming 30 minutes, I will try to convey what I would like to pull out of my academic hat in the coming years. Let me start with a hunch that has inspired my own thinking for over more than a decade now. The hunch itself is not very exotic, unfamiliar or strange, and could, perhaps, resonate with intuitions or experiences that you might hold yourself as well. This hunch stems from the increasingly, there is the word

again, accelerating pace in which all aspects of social life are being digitized nowadays. It is, in fact, very simple, and goes as follows: digital devices not only do some things, and make some things possible or impossible, they equally *make us do* certain things. Or to phrase this otherwise: digital devices possess agency that cannot be reduced to their official functions alone.

Starting from this general hunch, over the last years I have investigated in a qualitative manner the role that digital devices play in higher education. What do they do, that is, make possible and impossible? But more importantly: what do they make their users do? In a well-respected qualitative habit, let me give the word to an academic I interviewed and who had the following to say about what e-mail does, and related to the thesis I just advanced, what it makes do in daily practice:

> There are those days, when I arrive at home in the evening, and I'm in a bad mood, because I feel like *I didn't do anything today*. And those are the sort of days where, well, you have the feeling that you are not doing anything other than processing e-mails, and that for each e-mail you send two other ones bounce in. That feeling of… trying to empty the ocean with a thimble. And that is what gives me most stress at work. And, well, I find that anthropologically very interesting as well, what such a thing as e-mail *does* with a person, you know? I mean, it's like a kind of *monster*, right? Kind of a battle against your mailbox, and always reckoning 'How many are left'? You have to push the monster under the water, but it always resurfaces, higher and higher. And, you know, it's kind of Sisyphus labor, right? It's an unsolvable problem. Because each mail generates other mails. And the harder you try to solve the problem, the bigger the problem gets. (…) So yes, I cannot but notice that it stresses me out a lot, but uh, that it's always very double as well. It's equally kind of an addiction, because you're always curious about what has bounced in now, that, maybe, there might be a very nice message in there as well?

There is a lot in this statement. In fact, this academic unwittingly and beautifully made the case for what is presently partly at stake, for me, in qualitative research today. I couldn't think of a nicer account of, one might state, the *agency* of digital devices, and what these devices make us do. The expression is more beautiful when invoking the French distinction between *faire* and *faire faire*: rather than focusing on the agency of digital devices alone, I am convinced that we should equally look into and analyze this 'faire faire' of digital devices as well. The challenge is: How to do that? How can we research this 'faire faire'? For instance, how to account for the fact that, in a world awash in screens, parental mediation of children's screen times induces tensions with children and other parents and even leads to clashes between what Lauren Smiley (2018) has called 'parental tribes' (a manifestation of parents trying to control this 'faire faire' in different ways)? How to account for the immense variety in what these digital devices *make us do* – different 'faire faires', if you will, which might generate consequences for the worse or for the better, as this academic nicely argues when introducing both positive and negative feelings associated with the famous *fear of missing out*? How to research such variegated, if I may use the word here, effects? This forms the basis of my academic hat.

It is one thing to make such a basis explicit; it is a totally different thing to move from this very bottom of the hat to concrete research that might be pulled out of it. Again, this is the basis: how to account for what digital devices do, and make us do, in contemporary social and, in my specific field, educational, life? What I want to argue today, is that we – as qualitative researchers – face an important challenge. Indeed, I think that something is at stake here. What is at stake, as I will come to argue in what follows, is that we are currently not very well equipped to research such matters, and that the huge majority of this 'faire faire' is still being obfuscated nowadays.

The general line of my argument will be as follows. I will start with a brief but very broad overview of current qualitative research, and why traditional qualitative research methods are not particularly well-suited in order to trace this 'faire faire'. Briefly stated, the diagnosis I make is the following: qualitative research methods are at present ill-adapted at disentangling digital agency, and what such agency makes us do. As simple as stating a diagnosis is, coming up with possible solutions is a more complex matter. I will offer some possible ways of dealing with this diagnosis, by first providing a general approach, and by then elaborating upon two examples of innovative qualitative research methods. I will, in other words, show why it's necessary that qualitative research needs to have some other tricks up its sleeve as well. But let me start with traditional qualitative research methods.

Current qualitative approaches

At least for over a century now, qualitative research has been centrally interested in coming to an understanding of the perceptions and meanings of what particular individuals, or a group of individuals, feel, think, perceive, imagine, and so on. At the very beginning, this 'traditional' take on qualitative research implied the researcher to be a distant observer of a certain culture. As you are probably aware, qualitative inquiry has since then gone a long way, and has transmogrified into a field of research that, rather than aiming to observe at a distance, is now directed at providing insights into people's unique lived lives and experiences.

This contested history and evolution could be subject of another lecture, but let me for now just stress that at present, the majority of qualitative research methods are directed at offering other researchers the tools and devices in order to scrutinize the experiences and different meanings of individual persons. These researchers can then pick whatever, as the proverb goes, floats their boat. *And there is, let me be very clear on this point, nothing wrong with that.* But when it comes down to tracing the 'faire faire' of digital devices, an exclusive focusing on individuals, and their own experiences and attributed meanings, risks to miss the crucial point that the agency of the digital cannot be merely reduced to what people (come to) think of it. In the example of the academic, for instance, what this academic said, there and then, to me, as a qualitative researcher, is not enough to trace the agency of a

piece of software like e-mail. How often does she use it? Why? Where does it take up a central position? Where is it being marginalized? Where does it marginalize other activities? Who else is involved in making this piece of software operate likewise, for indeed, if nobody would send an e-mail to our academic, this device would in and on itself be nothing more than a mute piece of software? Such questions get nearly no deliberation in the personal approach.

Of course, not all qualitative research prioritizes the analysis of personal agency. A complementary strand focuses precisely on how individuals are always contained within an overarching structure that partly shapes and codetermines what individuals can do, feel or say. The focus of this strand is then not so much on individual meaning or experiences, but is precisely directed at surrounding structures and contexts that partly shape what individuals can do. The established method of critical discourse analysis, is an example of a methodological focus on these structuring elements, where the central contention is that language holds a structuring grip over us, and that power resides in how we talk, *can* talk, and *are expected to* talk about a certain topic of interest. This focus on structuring and/or powerful elements, again, constitutes a very important strand in the qualitative research field. But equally again, this focus is not particularly fruitful in disentangling the role and working operations of the digital in contemporary social life. The crucial point to be missed here is that digital devices are not only situated (for instance, developed or used) in a particular educational context, but that the agency of digital devices is first and foremost being made in and through daily *practice*.

Sociomaterial approaches to qualitative research

I hope that you forgive me that I have so crudely sketched current approaches within the very broad domain of qualitative research methods. But the general argument should be clear right now: focusing on agency or structure *alone* will not allow us to fully disentangle the 'faire faire' of digital devices. What we need is a focus on *practice*, and how practices are relationally composed with different actors of various kinds.

A way out of this problem is offered by sociomaterial approaches, a qualitative research field that I have contributed to quite a bit over the last years (e.g. Decuypere & Simons, 2016a). As the name already suggests, the main tenet of sociomaterial approaches is that social life cannot be fully apprehended without taking into account the material dimensions that are constitutive for the formation of social practices. Based on this premise, sociomaterial approaches contend that both social and material actors need to be analyzed mutually. Such mutual analysis enables to disentangle the complex webs of relations between actors that make up, that is to say *compose*, particular practices. The initial focus, hence, is neither on individuals' meaning making nor on overarching structures. Rather,

these approaches analyze social life in terms of *practices* that are considered to be always *in the making*, and do so by adopting a symmetrical inquisitive stance.

To make a very long story short, this symmetrical stance amounts to not placing any *a priori* emphasis on human or material actors before the actual conduct of an analysis (Latour, 2005). Instead, sociomaterial approaches focus on relations, and contend that it are precisely these relations that make up that something comes into being as, say, a teacher, or a pupil. An example to make this apprehensible on a very intuitive level: I can only deliver this lecture at present because you all allow me to do so. Put differently, you all relating to me, and to this presentation behind me, *makes me able* to deliver this lecture. Even more strongly, you all relating to me and this digital presentation – the relations that you at present establish with me and slides that are being shown – has a particular *effect*: it puts me, and the slides, in an *authoritative* position. This authoritative position is a position that is, so to say, *in the making*: the moment one of you starts shouting or that a phone starts ringing, at least some of you will relate to this newly interrupting actor.

This is, of course, a very minor example, but it makes quite clear that the direction of qualitative research changes considerably when we investigate sociomaterial effects. Indeed, our take on what qualitative research consists of starts to change when we begin investigating such effects, when we not only focus on perceptions, meanings or doings, but equally on what these doings make other actors do. Things that we commonly hold as natural or self-evident, all of a sudden need to be researched as the locally produced effect of empirical, describable, relations between actors. Order or stability, for instance, are the result of an immense amount of actors associating with each other.

'Context' is another example, itself being a set of practices that might – or might not – relate to the practice at hand. 'Context', then, is not to be thought of as a static or structuring thing flowing over our heads, but is a describable result of various relations. Suppose we want to research a particular digitizing educational practice, and that we find that the policy statement of Hilde Crevits, the current Flemish Minister of Education, plays a major role in how a teacher is redesigning her classroom practice. 'Education policy' should then not be considered as 'context', that is, as a big overarching monolith, but rather as a highly specific arrangement of documents, tables, websites, ministers, cabinets, and so on, that relationally gives shape to what can, or cannot, happen in a classroom setting today.

In sum, qualitative research that is sociomaterially interesting and promising, calls for a systematic empirical analysis of a lot of what we commonly assume to be self-evident. It is considered with the most basic of practices, in as far as these practices are conceived as being in the making. In the remainder of this lecture, I will offer you an illustration of two of such qualitative methods that seek to disentangle the 'faire faire' of digital devices.

Qualitative website analysis

Back to Crevits' policy statement. What is immediately apparent, is the act of referring which happens constantly: the statement refers to other actors in order to make its own propositions stronger or more convincing. Whereas this could already be the focus of an interesting analysis, what I am after here is not only the act of referring to texts, but the more general act of *linking* as such, as this is constantly done on websites. It could be argued that nowadays, such linking is not only and perhaps not even chiefly being done by referring to other documents alone: one of the affordances of digital technology is that it allows to explicitly hyperlink to texts, but equally to profiles, web pages, and so on.

For qualitative researchers, the digital age has the immense advantage that it makes relations explicitly visible, for instance in the form of hyperlinks. But this is only one feature that websites possess over and above traditional textual characteristics. How, then, can we analyze websites? It is quite remarkable that a Google Scholar search for "Qualitative website analysis" yields nearly no relevant results. In the coming years, it is my intention to develop a way to research in a qualitative manner how websites are relationally constituted, and what these websites make us do. Websites are quite unique environments that contain texts and figures, videos and links, that track us and log us, that entice us and let us interact, and so forth. Lemke (2002) pointed to the combination of all of these features as the 'hypermodality' of websites. Scrutinizing hypermodality in a qualitative manner requires a detailed, systematized and up-close study of how visual and textual actors interact with each other, and the particular sort(s) of messages that are conveyed likewise.

Take, as an example, a look at following picture:

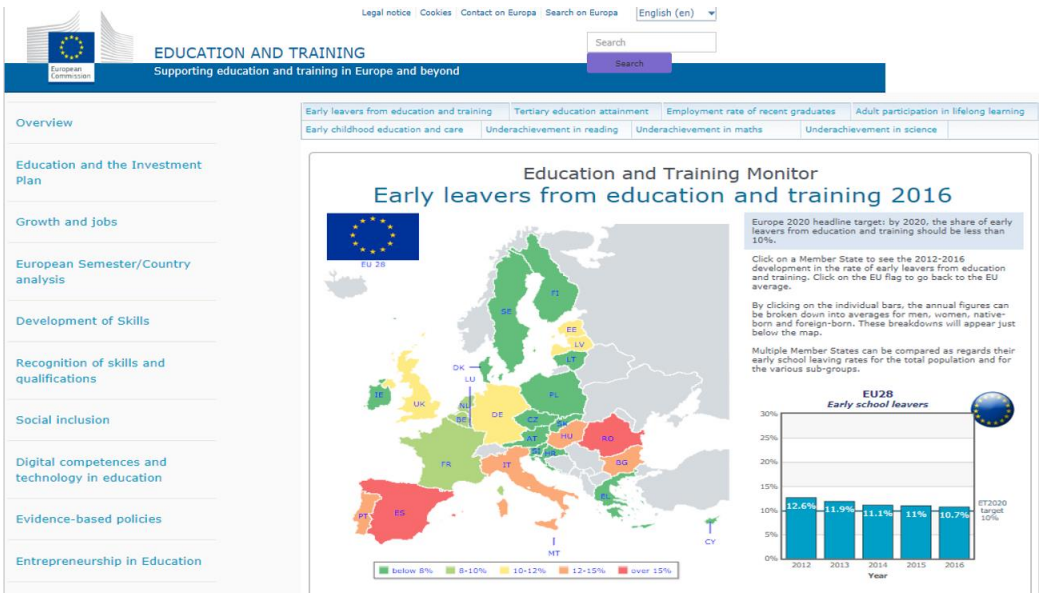

Figure 1. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/dashboard

In fact, it is not a picture, but an interactive map that you can 'play' with, and that can be found on the European Commission's website. This map visualizes *and* textualizes the results of a European study called the Education and Training Monitor. In a relational and sociomaterial vein, this interactive map is not merely a carrier of information that is neutrally being displayed here. Rather, such interactive tools are inscriptions that seek to *make us do* certain things: they make us think, in a very particular way, about what 'Europe' is, as well as about what 'good' education is. Even though this interactive tool contains an enormous amount of data that are crystallized and combined in one piece of screen real estate, this visualization is at once an extremely simplified version of the large-scale databases it draws upon, as well as of the broader spectrum of what education and training entail precisely. What this interactive map installs, then, is a double process of (esthetic) seduction and (visual and verbal) abstraction, by means of which an arena is opened in which countries are named, and where applicable shamed, by positioning them to each other (Decuypere, 2016).

Additionally, qualitative website analysis could equally look at what happens with this visualization outside the European Commission's website – for instance, who links to this visualization, how often, and where? This analysis could reveal that the Education & Training monitor is becoming an obligatory point to pass through in order to get something done: that it operates as a center that visualizes and textualizes what is deemed to be important in education, and that national education policies cannot but relate to this. Again, an illustration of 'faire faire' in practice, but equally an illustration of the fact that something 'big' like European education policy is constantly in the making and can only be accounted for by focusing on specific relations and operations. In that sense, websites have started to play a very important role in how education is being governed today. Qualitative researchers need to start to take the agency of such devices much more seriously, and it is my aim to develop a method to do so.

Visual network analysis

The method of qualitative website analysis is, of course, limited to websites. But what about methods that are able to take into account a greater variety of digital practices, that not only operate on or through the screen? A second method that I will further elaborate in the coming years, is directed at such questions and is called Visual Network Analysis (Venturini et al., 2015). Visual network analysis is a method that enables to render visible which actors relate with which other actors, and does so by taking up a relational gaze. To be clear from the outset: what I am after in this method, is not to visualize the underlying structure of social life – as it is often done in Social Network Analysis. Rather, visual network analysis is a tool that enables to present and scrutinize the relational composition of a particular practice under investigation, and of the 'faire faire' that such compositions

generate. As such, visual network analysis aims to answer questions as *How do actors relate to each other?*; *With which actors do they relate the most?*; *Which sorts of actors and relations are decisive in performing a particular activity?*; etc.

I am afraid that this is, again, quite a challenging task: at present, there is not much information with respect to how to construct and analyze networks in a qualitative manner. In order to construct networks likewise, I draw on traditional qualitative research methods, but with a twist: interviews, for instance, are a very good way to trace such relational compositions, in so far as we succeed in letting our participants speak exclusively about the actors with which they interact, and the relations they establish in doing so. As is the case with all sociomaterial qualitative methods, the crux of the method is situated at arriving at systematicity and fine-grainedness: participants need to be prompted to provide as much detail as possible, as accurately as possible, and as meticulously as possible, with respect to these actors and interactions. Tailored methodological techniques, such as approaching the interview as a hearing, are crucial in order to be able to do so (Decuypere & Simons, 2014).

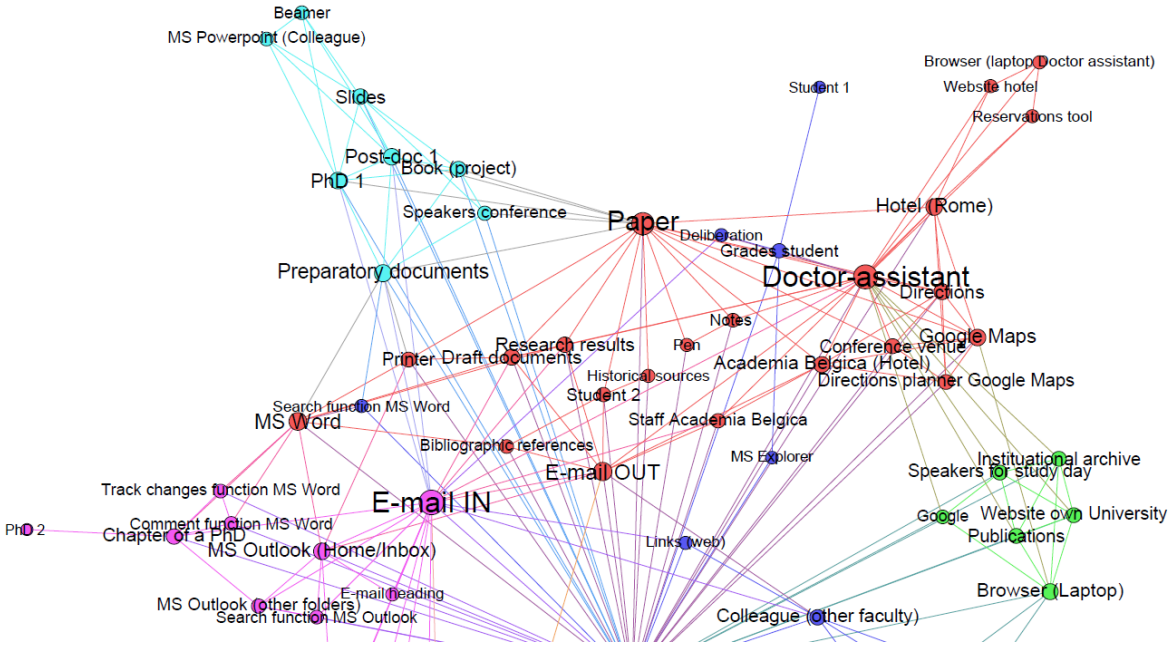

Figure 2.

The eventual visualization and analysis of the visual forms of networks is still work in progress, but let me give you a tiny example based on previous research. What you see in Figure 2, is part of a visualized network of the academic that had the word in the beginning of this lecture. You can see the e-mail program here, but divided in different parts of the program: the in- and outbox, e-mail headings, notifications, and so forth, and how these different parts interact with other actors in academic practice. In and on itself, this is not very interesting: the visualization of the network says us nothing about the effects of this relational distribution. But the qualitative nature of visual network analysis allows us to make a *visual interpretation* of this network and to start probing what such a distribution

implies for the studied setting (Figure 3). I don't have the time to walk you completely through all this now, so I need to limit myself to some basic points.

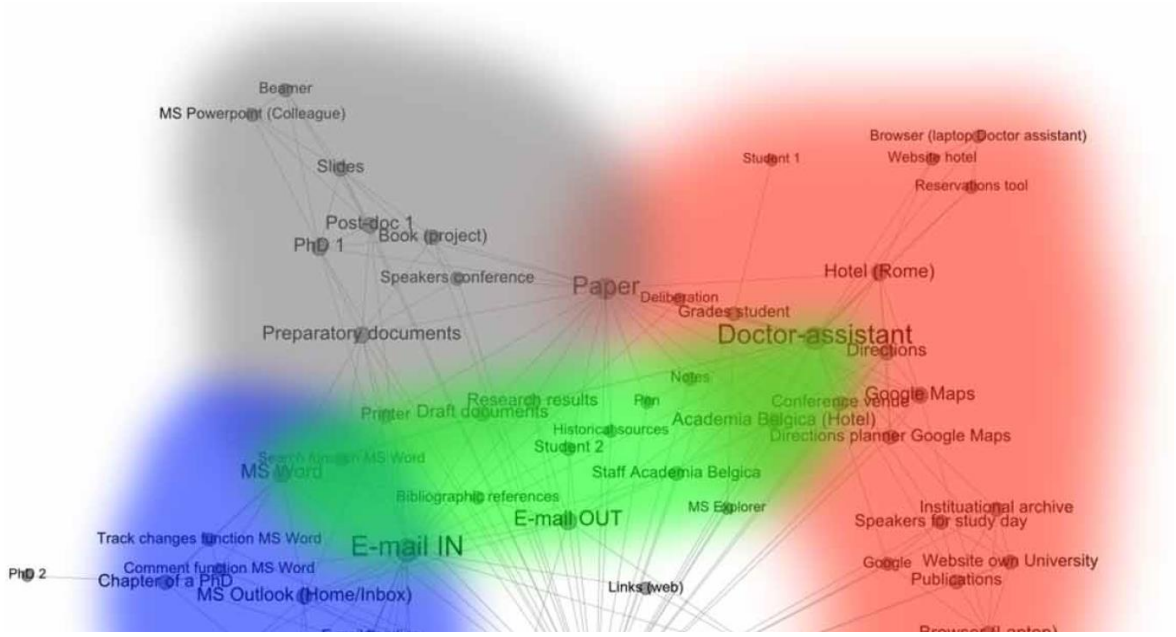

Figure 3 (Adapted from Decuypere & Simons, 2014: 133).

First, the visual clustering of actors allows to analyze which actors relate with each other on a daily basis. Visual network analysis thus allows us to discern which actors are deployed within which activities. So far, so good. But where it starts to get truly interesting, is at the boundaries between different regions: the e-mail inbox, for instance, is positioned at the boundary of two different regions, just as a doctor-assistant is. The specificity of actors at the boundary of regions, hence, is that they are positioned at once in different types of activities, and that they hence associate the practice under investigation: because of their being boundary actors, they associate this practice and bring it into union. A visual network perspective can thus assist in disentangling the role of various crucial actors in establishing specific sorts of practices. As interesting as these boundary actors, are marginalized actors or actors that don't even appear in the network. This might provide us crucial information about which actors are getting marginalized in educational practice, or conversely, which actors are being given or claiming a central relational position. As such, visual networks enable to analyze on a very specific level what is at stake in contemporary educational settings.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by coming full circle, and going back to the question that informed the topic of this lecture: How can we design, evaluate and theoretically elaborate qualitative research methods in the digital age? First, as far as design is concerned, I hope to have convinced you that the contemporary qualitative research field cannot be limited to

experiences, meaning giving, and/or structure: the digital age necessitates qualitative researchers to revise the methods that we currently have at our disposal, and a sociomaterial approach aims to do just that. Second, qualitative research methods can only be properly developed if they are tested and evaluated in settings that the researcher is familiar with – in my case, the broad field of education. This is not to say that these methods can only be applied to the educational field, but it do is to say that their evaluation is dependent on the personal affinity of the researcher. Third, with respect to theoretical elaboration, I hope to have convinced you of the importance of scrutinizing what the digital does and makes do in contemporary educational practices. There is a huge need to meticulously scrutinize what the digital does at present in, and to, the educational field, and I see it as an additional asset of the methods that I just presented you that they will enable to make a theoretical contribution to the educational field as well.

Two final remarks. First, because of time constraints, I could only share some basics of two of these methods in the making with you, but let me stress here that we need – and are developing – many more (for instance, specific forms of ethnographic research; Decuypere & Simons, 2016b; In Press). Second, even though these methods aim to push the qualitative research field further, I would like to stress again that I am not of the opinion that other more established methods need to be discarded. On the contrary. I would be very happy to think along with you in how we can design, evaluate, and theoretically elaborate whichever method you might have in mind for conducting your own study. To say it in sociomaterial terms: I really don't ask you to put me in an authoritative position, even though I would like it very much should you desire to relate to me once in a while.

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